



House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing  
on  
Human Rights in Bangladesh: An Update

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Thank you to the Lantos Commission for organizing this panel and to my esteemed colleagues for their comments. I am here speaking on behalf of Human Rights Watch.

First, we would like to underscore the significant impact that the United States has had on protecting rights in an effort to ensure space for democratic participation in Bangladesh. Following human rights sanctions by the Department of Treasury there was an immediate drop in extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Instead, we saw people still being picked up and held in unlawful detention for a period of time, but then either being released or produced in court.

Although we continue to hear concerning accounts of torture in custody, the drop in enforced disappearances and killings directly following the sanctions clearly demonstrated that Bangladesh authorities could bring an end to the abuses whenever they choose.

The US government also decided not to invite Bangladesh to the Summit for Democracy and announced in May of this year that it will restrict visas for any Bangladeshis undermining the democratic process. These decisions have put the Bangladesh government on notice that its international partners are paying close attention and may have the effect of deterring individual members of the security forces from participating in repression and violence.

However, as we get closer to the election, we are witnessing a rise in violence and security forces abuses.

We urge congress not to trust claims by Bangladesh authorities that they are committed to holding free elections. While the state minister for Foreign Affairs claimed during a recent media briefing that Bangladesh had renewed its “commitment to hold free and fair elections,” security forces simultaneously unleashed autocratic and abusive attacks that clearly contradict those claims.

Just a few days after the state minister made these commitments, Bangladesh police indiscriminately fired rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons, and beat opposition party supporters with batons during protests. In the lead-up to these demonstrations, authorities arrested over 800 members of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in what appears to be a systematic effort to target and detain political opponents.

Authorities also filed cases against over 1,500 named leaders and activists of the opposition and over 15,000 unnamed people. This use of criminal complaints against large numbers of “unknown” people is a common abusive practice in Bangladesh, allowing the police to intimidate and threaten virtually anyone with arrest.

In previous months, law enforcement officers have used these open cases as warrants to raid the homes of political opposition members. According to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, over four million cases were filed against their leaders, activists, and supporters and its associate bodies between January 2009 and June 2023

In many cases, the arrest charges appear baseless. In fact, similar to what we saw ahead of the 2018 election, some of the accused were either dead, abroad, or hospitalized at the time of their alleged offense. For example, on July 18, ahead of the recent protests, police file a case against 109 BNP leaders and activists and 500 unnamed people, accusing them of vandalizing a college campus. However, two of the accused, Shafiqul Suman and Abdul Hawlader, had died months ago.

These cases are so common in Bangladesh that they are colloquially described as “ghost cases.” The practice reveals the true intention of the arrests: to decimate the opposition.

Indeed, the recent mass arrests appear to reflect leaked minutes from a police meeting held in early July that outlined orders to systematically arrest and convict opposition members so that they would be disqualified from participating in the national election. In the leaked minutes, a senior police officer admitted that “[there] is a lot of pressure on the government from outside regarding the elections” and instructed the police to ensure convictions of members of the opposition because if “they are punished through trial, no one will be able to raise questions about them internationally.” The minutes include 10 steps to ensure convictions of opposition members. Soon after, BNP leader Tarique Rahman was convicted for corruption and disqualified from contesting.

Opposition groups have also alleged that they are frequently attacked by ruling Awami League supporters, who seem to enjoy police protection. While there may be violence on both sides, members of the ruling party are rarely held accountable.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina plays a role in inciting such violence. For example, during a rally in December she told her party leaders and activists that “the hands that would be raised against us have to be broken.” The next day, Awami League members, backed by security forces, violently assaulted opposition gatherings.

International observers should view the recent brutal crackdown and systematic arrests of the political opposition as a clear indication that elections in Bangladesh will not be free.

The United States has been an invaluable partner in pressing the Bangladesh government to stop election-related abuses. We urge Congress to take the following three actions as the election fast approaches:

First, as the largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, Congress should press the UN department of peace operations to publicly commit to an enhanced human rights screening of Bangladesh peacekeepers at all levels. Ensuring that human rights abusers are screened out of participation in UN missions is a clear way to ensure that the UN is implementing effective policies and procedures to prevent human rights violations, as is required by appropriations legislation.

Second, the new version of the Digital Security Act has been announced. Since its enactment in 2018, the DSA has been used by authorities to silence dissent. It has even been used to arrest children for voicing criticism of the Prime Minister on Facebook. The new version of the DSA—the Cyber Security Act—is an effort to appease international partners. The US and others should hold the Bangladesh government to its promises and ensure these reforms do not mean the new law is simply the DSA by another name. Congress should also press the government to drop charges against all people arbitrarily accused under the DSA, as well as the previous Information Communication Technology Act. This includes dropping charges against prominent rights activists like Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan of Odhikar, photojournalist Shahidul Alam, well-known journalist Rozina Islam, and others.

Finally, in the run up to the elections, Members of Congress should continue to publicly raise concerns regarding the absence of conditions for a free and fair election. The abuses that we’ve documented over the last several months already undermine the democratic process, and the Bangladesh government should understand US policymakers are keeping a close eye.